

Rep. Tom Udall (NM-3)
House Committee on Veterans Affairs Hearing
Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Budget Shortfalls
Opening Statement
June 29, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this crucial hearing today. Thank, Mr. Secretary, for joining us.

I am holding here in my hand a stack of letters sent to the President, the Speaker, and the House Appropriations Committee over the past year.

October 11, 2004 – A letter to the President requesting he reevaluate his FY05 budget request, in light of the large number of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan were in need of healthcare.

February 17, 2005 – Letters to the President and the Appropriations Committee requesting that they add an additional \$1.3 billion to the FY05 Supplemental Appropriations bill, to provide healthcare and readjustment assistance for Afghanistan and Iraq veterans.

March 7, 2005 – A letter to Speaker Hastert about the woefully insufficient funding for the VA under the President's FY06 budget proposal, and asking that the House increase the amount by \$3 billion for veterans' healthcare.

April 27, 2005 – A letter to Secretary Nicholson about how the budget cuts for veterans' healthcare have hurt New Mexico. The Accommodations Hotel Lodging Program in Albuquerque has been forced to limit access to veteran patients further than 150 miles, which has adversely affected thousands of veterans. The average wait for dental appointments at the dental facility in the Albuquerque VA is 2 years. All of these letters were ignored. If what I have read in the papers is accurate, it is about time the Secretary and Administration fully acknowledge what is going on here.

I hope today the House will pass an emergency supplemental appropriations bill for veterans' healthcare. We are here today to figure out what events and mistakes leading up to today made this necessary, and what the VA—and this Committee—are going to do to prevent a recurrence in the future.

I am particularly concerned that the Committee was not informed of the VA's agreement that there was a shortfall earlier. I want answers about the timeline here, and about when exactly the VA began reprogramming money for this purpose, without the knowledge of the Congress. And, if the main problem here is that the VA underestimated how many soldiers returning from Iraq it would need to care for, what does that say about our planning for that war?

I very much look forward to hearing Secretary Nicholson's answers to these questions today. There are 183,000 veterans in my state who deserve nothing less.